

BuffaloNews.com

COMMENTARY

Democracy just isn't to Collins' liking



By **Donn Esmonde**

Published: December 17, 2010, 12:00 AM

[3 Comments](#)

[The Esmonde Files videos](#)

[Recent Donn Esmonde Columns](#)

- [In this 'hood, taggers find a hornet's nest](#)
- [Flammable water can't be healthy](#)
- [Change here? You must be kidding](#)
- [Shed no tears over Verizon's cold shoulder](#)
- [Friend's vision helped save Statler](#)

Updated: December 17, 2010, 10:03 AM

We are getting, with Chris Collins, more than a lot of people bargained for. And not in a good way. It goes beyond the Republican county executive's recent assault on cultural funding, or any other policy issue. What bothers me is his apparent disdain for democracy.

He stormed the barricades again Monday by declaring "null and void" the changes that Erie County legislators made to his proposed budget. It was further evidence that

he does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the legislative branch of government—or, frankly, any entity that gets in his way. His audacity is off the charts.

Democratic legislators took him to court, and a judge Tuesday thankfully swatted Collins' latest "null and void" coup attempt into the cheap seats.

The episode was typical. Collins routinely overextends his power and then dares people to do something about it. The only recourse, as victims of his de facto monarchy have found, is to take him to court. Which, predictably, people keep doing.

The ex-CEO was elected on the promise that he would run government like a business. To an overtaxed populace, it was music (presumably played by a Collins-approved cultural) to their ears. What we got, to my mind, is not a man who merely carried business efficiencies into public office. He brought the worst aspects of a top-down, cutthroat corporate culture to a checks-and-balances government. Democracy is taking a beating.

Collins last year knew he could not successfully veto the \$1.7 million that legislators put in the budget, mostly for cultural. So he—with astonishing audacity— simply refused to deliver the money, declaring the Legislature's move "null and void." The cultural still have not gotten those dollars. Erie Community College last month got \$208,000 that Collins also held back, but only after Democratic legislators sued him.

Arrogance is the rule, not the exception. Collins last year refused to give the Department of Justice unaccompanied access to investigate abuses at two county jails. It prompted a federal lawsuit that so far has cost taxpayers more than \$160,000 in county legal fees.

Collins was furious two years ago when legislators moved money between lines on his proposed budget, even though it's part of their jobs. His adolescent refusal to accept their budget changes would have—had a judge not intervened—cost us a tax increase.

And that's just the shortlist. Add to it a transparently political assault in his budget on the office of County Comptroller Mark Poloncarz, a Democrat, which potentially cripples financial oversight. Factor in his withholding of public records on the cost of defending inmate-abuse lawsuits. And on and on.

Collins puts it all in the politically appealing context of protecting the taxpayer's back. I have no doubt he wants to cut unnecessary costs, and a lot of folks— myself included—are onboard with him on that count. But there is a balance among costs, services and amenities that he does not have the right, in a representative government, to single-handedly decide. Yet, time and again, he simply does what he wants—until somebody stops him.

Voters elected him to be county executive, not schoolyard bully. Apparently you get used to getting your way when you own a company and every worker is your underling. But this is county government, not ZeptoMetrix. In a democracy, there are limits to the power held by any one person. Legislators are there to limit a county executive's power— not, as Collins seems to think, to nod like bobbleheads and fetch

him coffee.

When Collins' predecessor, Joel Giambra, was at the height of his power, critics dubbed him "King Joel." This guy acts like he actually wears a crown.